Runaway and Unaccompanied Youth.

Invisible and At Risk.

Background

To understand youth homelessness, we begin with a definition of the population. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has four categories of youth homelessness:

- Category 1: Literal Homelessness- Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (includes a subset for an individual who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided);
- Category 2: Imminent Risk of Homelessness- Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence;
- Category 3: Homeless Under other Federal Statutes- Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; and
- Category 4: Fleeing Domestic Violence- Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member.[1]

Historically, a significant factor in the inability to adequately address youth homelessness has been the lack of substantiated data. In the past several years, potential strategies have been identified based on new initiatives and research. Voices of Youth Count, an initiative of Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, found that nationally, 1 in 30 adolescent minors ages 13 to 17 endures some form of homelessness in a year. A quarter of the prevalence involves couch surfing only. They also determined that 1 in 10 young adults ages 18 to 25 experiences homelessness in a year. Half of the prevalence involves couch surfing only. [2]

In Connecticut, the goal is to provide housing interventions for youth that align with the federal definitions. The focus is on youth who are literally homeless, imminently homeless and/or fleeing domestic violence and on providing appropriate services and supports to those under all federal definitions, including the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which defines youth as homeless "if they [lack] a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons; living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to lack of alternative accommodations; living in emergency or transitional shelters; and living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar places." [3]

While the definitions and data can seem complex, it's critical that we understand the full scope of the problem and identify the best strategies to reduce and end youth homelessness. A statewide workgroup in CT has been working diligently since 2008 to get better data, understand the root causes and advocate for additional supports for youth experiencing homelessness. Because these youth are much harder to identify and often "invisible" -- the early part of the work was making the case that the issue even existed. When we talk about youth homelessness, we are referring to unaccompanied children or youth and young adults who are on their own. These youth are vulnerable to a range of negative experiences including exploitation and victimization.

Homelessness and the Juvenile Justice System

The National Alliance to End Homelessness states that on a single night in 2017, nearly 41,000 (40,799) unaccompanied youth were counted as homeless. Of those, 88% were between the ages of 18 to 24. The remaining 12% (or 4,789 unaccompanied children) were under the age of 18. They estimate that over the course of a year, approximately 550,000 unaccompanied youth and young adults up to age 24 experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week. More than half are under the age of 18. [4] Youth and Young Adults (YYA) tend to be homeless episodically and 86% of YYA return home within one week.

The Administration for Children and Families interviewed 656 homeless youth, ages 14-21, in 11 cities across the country to gain an understanding of the experiences of youth who have been homeless and how they became homeless. [2] As stated in "Addressing the Intersection of Juvenile Justice Involvement and Youth Homelessness: Principles for Change", when asked why they first experienced homelessness:

• 51% said they had been asked to leave home or were kicked out;
• 25% said they could not find a job;
• 24% said it was because they had been physically abused or beaten;
• 23% said it was due to a caregiver's drug or alcohol use; and
• 13% said it was due to their own drug/alcohol issues.

They also found that in the US:
• Almost 44% had been in a juvenile detention center, jail, or prison;
• Nearly 78% had at least one prior interaction with the police; and
• Nearly 62% had been arrested at some point in their lives. [5]

ADDRESSING THE INTERSECTIONS OF JUVENILE JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: PRINCIPLES FOR CHANGE

Additionally, 7% directly attributed their first homelessness experience to exiting a jail or prison. [6] Runaway and homeless youth have high rates of involvement in the juvenile justice system, are more likely to engage in substance use and delinquent behavior, be teenage parents, drop out of school, suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, and meet the criteria for mental illness. [7] They may also be exposed to prostitution, physical abuse, illness, suicide, school dropout, mental health problems, and gang affiliation. [8]

After entering the Juvenile Justice System, when young people leave residential juvenile justice placements, they face many challenges during their reentry, including having unstable home settings or lack of family support, struggling to remain in school, lacking the skills needed for employment, experiencing a gap in behavioral health services and facing challenges with inadequate housing. Any of these situations can contribute to recidivism.

Special populations and their needs

Although males have historically accounted for the majority of juvenile offenses that often lead to youth homelessness, recently there has been an increase in contact with girls. According to the Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ), girls are more likely to be arrested and charged for status offenses than for other offenses which are often a case of running away from a traumatic home life. CJJ also reports that girls are more likely to

enter the delinquency system if they are: living in poverty, exposed to domestic violence and/or substance abuse, running away repeatedly, experiencing sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse, feeling disconnected from school or experiencing academic failure, or having mental health and substance abuse issues. [9] Because these traumatic experiences often lead to juvenile justice involvement and homelessness, current best practice recommends that we engage in gender-responsive services when interacting with female youth populations, lessening the risk of further traumatization.

According to the National Crittenton Foundation's Gender Injustice report:
•   45% of justice-involved girls in one study reported experiencing five or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES);
•   31% reported experiencing sexual abuse in the home;
•   84% reported experiencing family violence; and
•   Girls report abuse at 4.4 times the rate of boys.

There is a lack of research and evaluation in girl-specific programming due to its only very recent increase, however there are some research-based principles that can increase the likelihood of effective female programming. [4]

• Being strength-based, trauma-informed and relational;
• Ensuring clients' physical, psychological and emotional safety;
• Employing staff who are sensitive to trauma and understand girls' socialization; and
• Providing ongoing staff training and support. [10]

Another population with increased risk for homelessness is LGBTQ youth. According to findings from Voices of Youth Count, an initiative of Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, LGBT youth had a 120% higher risk of homelessness. LGBTQ youth face threats of being rejected by their

families, bullied and harassed in school, becoming suicidal and other associated health issues. [10] Once in the juvenile justice system, LGBTQ youth are over-represented and more likely to be seriously maltreated by other youth. They may receive excessive punishments like secure confinement because of court bias and/or attempts to keep these youth insulated from maltreatment when they are kept in the general population. Due to such high risk factors for this population, best recommendations for effective and ethical services being provided to LGBTQ youth include:

- Identify when youth are entering our systems due to alienation, exclusion or persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Take steps to preserve youth safety by protecting confidentiality, and when able, provide targeted interventions to increase family acceptance of youth's identity.
- Ensure that LGBTQ youth are connected to affirmational social, recreational and spiritual activities, as well as access to care that aligns with LGBTQ care best practice.
- Ensure counseling is made available to the youth and their family when family rejection is an issue, make every effort to keep children with their families, and when unable to do so, ensure that residential placements are safe, non-isolating, stigmatizing or punitive.
- Recognize the unique trauma these youth may have experienced in the past, and most likely continue to experience, and thus may need trauma informed care/interventions.

Ultimately, all professionals must be given the tools to treat all youth without bias of their sexual orientation or gender identity. [4]
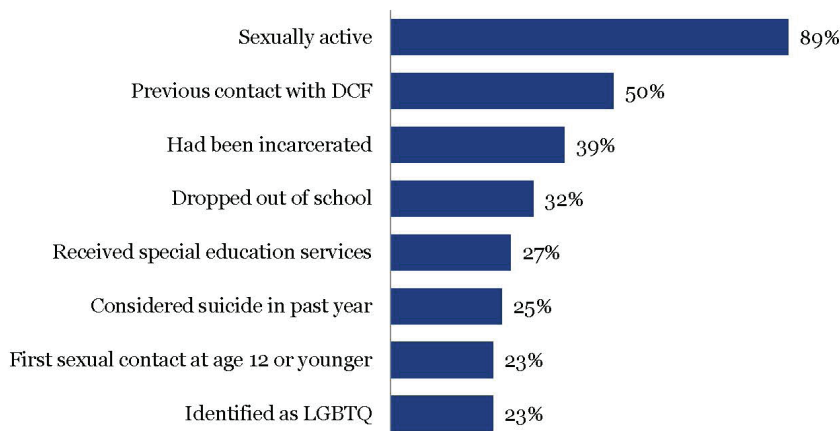
The Youth Homelessness Experience in Connecticut

Connecticut has faced numerous challenges on the journey to stably house our youth. Because of the "invisible" nature of youth homelessness, there hasn't been a way of identifying housing instability, or knowledge of housing needs, within the juvenile justice system. Prior to the current transfer of all juvenile cases to the Judicial Branch, a youth's case in the juvenile justice system was being handled by multiple agencies and there was a lack of coordination and data sharing. [11]

Until now, there has been a lack of ownership for these youth. The Reaching Home Campaign is the statewide effort to end homelessness among multiple populations, including youth. The Campaign includes a statewide Youth and Young Adult (YYA) Homelessness Workgroup that aims to end youth homelessness by the end of 2020. The Partnership for Strong Communities staffs and manages the Reaching Home Campaign and its Workgroups. Stacey Violante Cote, attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy, chairs the YYA Homelessness Workgroup. In 2012, the group commissioned Yale University to conduct the state's first study of homelessness among youth, entitled Invisible No More, which showed the following trends:

89% of sexually active young people were with an average of 5.6 sexual partners
23.5% first experienced sexual intercourse at age 12 or under
37% had been removed from the home by DCF
49% moved more than 6 times in their lifetime
50% were arrested at least once in their lifetime
39% reported having been incarcerated in jail, prison, juvenile detention or a residential facility

In addition, YYA reported the following life experiences:

Life experience	Percentage
Sexually active	89%
Previous contact with DCF	50%
Had been incarcerated	39%
Dropped out of school	32%
Received special education services	27%
Considered suicide in past year	25%
First sexual contact at age 12 or younger	23%
Identified as LGBTQ	23%

The study identified 98 youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability and conducted structured and open-ended interviews about their experiences. The age range of participants interviewed was between 14 and 24 years of age, with an average of 18.95 years (SD = 2.47). They were categorized as 54.1% female, 41.8% male and 3.1% transgender. (Not all participants responded to every question.)

The racial breakdown of the young people interviewed, the following data were observed:

• 43 African American (43.9%)
• 22 Mixed Race (22.4%)
• 21 Caucasian (21.4%)

Interestingly, these youth had varied responses to the value they place on school. "In open-ended responses, a subset of youth (N =40) reported barriers related to school. These included challenges with English and academics. Several youth reported that these struggles led them to stop going to school. Additional school-related challenges included feeling socially awkward and having social issues with classmates. In contrast, several youth reported that school was a source of support and a significant strength was that they were able to graduate from high school. Close relationships with principals, social workers, teachers, guidance counselors, and other school staff often provided emotional support. One youth also reported that teachers provided money and transportation for work and/or appointments when needed." [8]

In March, 2015, The Reaching Home Campaign launched the Opening Doors for Youth plan based on the federal Opening Doors model. The plan included creating a map of educational, health and social services in order to understand the array of support services available to youth ages 14 – 24. The purpose was to understand the range of existing services; their target populations and eligibility criteria; and their geographical locations.

"Altogether, 342 services or resources were mapped, each entry denoting a distinct program or resource aimed at supporting teenagers and young adults in one of the areas of need above. The search was based on lists of services supplied by members of the working group and by web searches, with email queries to programs as needed." [12]

The Opening Doors for Youth 2.0 completed in December 2017, provides an action plan based on the learnings from the first plan. The vision is a Connecticut where all young people have safe, stable places to live and opportunities to reach their full potential with a focus on:

• Collaborating with partners in child welfare, juvenile and criminal justice, and educational systems, among others, to ensure youth falling into homelessness is a rare occurrence;
• Creating a coordinated response system within each region of Connecticut to ensure a youth's episode of homelessness is brief; and
• Connecting youth to services within the community, kin and/or other natural supports, and employment and other necessary tools, such as living and relationship skills, to maintain stability and well-being, to ensure that homelessness is non-recurring and providing youth with an opportunity to achieve their goals and thrive.

The goals are to have the community identify all unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness; use shelter diversion strategies whenever possible and provide immediate access to low-barrier shelter to any youth who needs and wants it; use a coordinated entry process to link all youth experiencing homelessness to housing and services that are tailored to their needs; act with urgency to swiftly assist youth to move into permanent or non-time-limited housing options with appropriate services and supports; and have resources, plans and system capacity in place to continue to prevent and quickly end future experiences of homelessness among youth. [12]

As with national strategies, Positive Youth Development and Trauma-informed practices were incorporated into the work.

How Connecticut is Working on Ending Youth Homelessness

The Opening Doors for Youth plan was a multi-stakeholder initiative formed to create a comprehensive, integrated network of services for young people ages 14-24 who are homeless or unstably housed in Connecticut. Opening Doors for Youth stakeholders began working in March 2014 to assess the current service landscape in the state and formulate recommendations for improvement. They developed an action plan that provides all Connecticut youth and young adults with safe, stable homes and opportunities. The plan was built on the framework for Opening Doors, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness' (USICH) first comprehensive strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness.

Prior to March 2015, the Annual Point in Time Count, executed by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH), was not consistently able to identify the unaccompanied "invisible" homeless youth population. Reaching Home, in partnership with CCEH, organized and implemented Connecticut's first statewide Youth Count in 2015, which has now become an annual count in conjunction with the Point in Time. This Count employed new strategies for identifying and surveying unaccompanied YYA.

Building off of these strategies, CCEH has now implemented two additional Counts which have drastically improved CT's data on youth experiencing homelessness. In the 2018 Youth Count, 5,054 youth under the age of 25 were estimated to be homeless or unstably housed, including 254 counted as literally homeless.[13]

Opening Doors for Youth Plan 2.0

The Partnership for Strong Communities led the effort to secure one of ten national Youth Homelessness Demonstration grants from HUD in 2016 which provided $6.5 million to develop a Coordinated Community Plan and design projects to end youth homelessness in the state. The YYA Homelessness Workgroup developed the Plan and released an RFP to local providers across most of the state to apply for funding for youth projects in alignment with the community plan.

The Reaching Home Campaign's YYA Homelessness Workgroup recently established a time-limited Systems taskforce to better address the needs of youth who are experiencing homelessness and are involved in state systems with particular focus on the juvenile justice, child welfare and mental health systems.

Some of the major strategies identified in the plan include:

•   Build upon and refine base of research and data to fully understand the scope and nature of the problem and to effectively target interventions
•   Integrate housing solutions into discharge planning from juvenile justice and child welfare systems
•   Establish ways to assure youth are not released into unsafe or unstable living situations that could lead to homelessness
•   Fill the gaps in the housing continuum so that youth have access to safe housing at all times
•   Identify and begin to plan for housing needs immediately upon entry
•   Include housing solutions in the plans and recommendations of the state's JJPOC
•   Reduce barriers to housing for those with criminal records, including public housing policies that prohibit successful re-entry, disconnect families, and ultimately increase recidivism
•   Consider a juvenile justice record erasure law in order to help prevent youth from experiencing collateral consequences of juvenile court involvement which can lead to homelessness
•   Create targeted service approaches for "dual status" or "cross over youth" given their vulnerability
•   Educate juvenile justice providers about the educational legal rights of students experiencing homelessness to ensure students remain in school and receive all necessary supports, thus preventing juvenile justice involvement.

The Campaign also identified the need to convene a Criminal Justice Taskforce to tackle systems issue related to the adult criminal justice system with a focus area on 18-24 year olds. The overall pace of the Campaign's work to reach the goal of ending homelessness among youth has increased dramatically over the past two years. The target date was moved from the end of 2022 to the end of 2020 more than a year ago based on the consensus of key stakeholders and in line with the federal goal.

Conclusion

Providing timely and direct interventions to unaccompanied and runaway youth is important to protect them from the risks of couch surfing and living on the streets, and to support positive youth development. Yet, despite the risks and needs of these youth, few appear to know of, and access, support services. Even more critical is addressing the family/parental needs to prevent youth and/or their families from becoming homeless and addressing their behavioral health needs through comprehensive methods that involve both youth and their families. With organizations like the Partnership for Strong Communities and the Center for Children's Advocacy, Connecticut is seeing significant improvements in the tools we have to identify youth at risk of homelessness and assess their needs, linking them with the many available community resources.
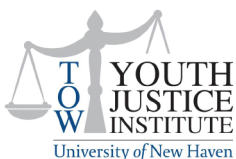
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This Issue Brief is a collaboration with the Partnership for Strong Communities and Center for Childrens Advocacy.

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